

# The representation of women as a competitive self-objectified image: a new design identity of misleading slimming advertising

**Rudi W. de Lange**

Tshwane University of Technology

E-mail: delangerw@tut.ac.za

Misleading slimming advertisements are a prominent visual feature in South African magazines that target young women. These commercial messages are particularly pervasive in magazines that focus on health, fitness, and beauty. An analysis of slimming advertisements in the *Fitness* magazine has identified a trend to avoid using overt misleading claim-based messages in favour of competitive self-objectification. This new design identity differs from traditional slimming advertisements in that it features the objectified as the primary graphic element and makes fewer, if any, contestable textual claims. Reading these objectified images through the female gaze as well as from a positivist paradigm predicts two contrasting and opposing outcomes. Objectified imagery may trigger negative body esteem, causing viewers to reject the message and form a negative brand association. Viewers may succumb to the explicit visual call for competitive self-objectification, adopt this as the norm and so accept the marketing message. Objectified imagery without measureable textual claims allows marketers to circumvent the Advertising Standards Authority of South Africa's Code on Slimming and enables them to use these images as misleading visceral graphic elements.

**Key words:** objectification, misleading advertising, design identity

## Die voorstelling van vroue in die vorm van 'n self-objektiewe beeld: 'n nuwe ontwerpidentiteit gevorm deur misleidende verslankingsadvertensies

Misleidende gewigsverlies-advertensies is 'n prominente visuele verskynsel in Suid-Afrikaanse tydskrifte gemik op jong vroue. Hierdie handelsboodskappe is veral volop in tydskrifte wat fokus op gesondheid, fiksheid, en skoonheid. 'n Ontleding van gewigsverlies-advertensies in die tydskrif *Fitness* dui op 'n vermyding van openlik misleidende aanspraak-gebaseerde boodskappe na een gekenmerk aan mededingende self-objektivering. Hierdie nuwe ontwerpidentiteit verskil van tradisionele gewigsverlies-advertensies in soverre dat dit die geobjektiveerde as die primêre grafiese element bevat en minder, indien enige, aanvegbare tekstuele aansprake maak. 'n Vertolking van hierdie geobjektiveerde beelde vanuit die oogpunt van 'n vrou sowel as vanuit 'n positivistiese paradigma stel twee kontrasterende en opponerende resultate op die voorgrond. Geobjektiveerde beelde mag aanleiding gee tot 'n negatiewe waardering van die eie liggaam, en wat daartoe aanleiding kan gee dat ontvangers die boodskap verwerp en 'n negatiewe assosiasie met die handelsmerk vorm. Daarenteen mag ontvangers swig voor die eksplisiete visuele oproep tot mededingende self-objektivering, dit as die norm aanneem en sodoende die bemarkingsboodskap aanvaar. Geobjektiveerde beelde sonder meetbare tekstuele aansprake stel bemarkers in staat om die Owerheid vir Advertensiestandaarde se Verslankingskode te omseil en om hierdie beelde subtiel in te span as misleidende grafiese elemente.

**Sleutelwoorde:** objektivering, misleidende advertering, ontwerpidentiteit

**M**arketers who promote inert substances as slimming<sup>1</sup> products often target the negative body esteem harboured by many young women through the use of unsubstantiated promises in misleading advertisements. Advertising regulators, in turn, address this misleading practice by holding advertisers accountable through issuing adverse rulings as well as calls for sanctions by the media industry. South Africa's advertising regulator, the Advertising Standards Authority of South Africa (ASASA), is an independent body that is established and funded by the South African marketing communication industry. It is a reactive body and only acts in response to a complaint from a competitor or from a concerned member of the public. An analysis of the ASASA's rulings with regard to slimming advertisements from June 2012 to June 2014 revealed that the lack of substantiation is one of the main reasons why the ASASA

issues adverse rulings against advertisers of slimming products. Further detail and explication surrounding this analysis is presented later in this paper. In an attempt to evade possible adverse rulings and the concomitant negative publicity, some marketers avoid using text that contains measurable product claims. As a result text that could be in contravention of the ASASA's Code of Advertising Practice<sup>2</sup> and exaggerated product claims in an advertisement that a consumer could use in a complaint, are either minimal or absent. In addition, some of these text-restricted advertisements feature an objectified model as the main graphic element in the advertisement in order to make an exaggerated (and thus unsubstantiated) visual claim as regards the product's efficacy. Product claims that could be in contravention of the ASASA's Code on Slimming<sup>3</sup> are thus minimal or absent. The focus of these objectifying advertisements is on competition, body toning and sculpting, fitness, and weight control, rather than an assertive call for losing weight. Marketers emphasise the "after" image, and use a positive health approach, rather than misleading textual claims with traditional "before" and "after" photographs. These objectified images act as strong hedonic and misleading visceral testimonies of the advertised product's self-styled efficacy claims. This new design identity differs from traditional slimming advertisements in that viewers must now infer the (misleading) marketing claims of slimming in the absence of contestable textual claims.

This new approach raises a two-part question: What is the potential effect of this new design identity when viewed through a positivist lens, and does using an objectified image as a visual testimony enable marketers to circumvent the Advertising Standards Authority's Code on Slimming and their requirements on the use of testimonials and endorsement? This investigation first considers empirical studies for an answer to the first part of the question, and reviews an ASASA ruling to answer the second part of the question. A thematic and frequency analysis of advertisements in the *Fitness* magazine and a critical visual content analysis of a slimming advertisement provided additional data for the proposed answers.

There are four parts to this article. The first part considers objectification and the process of self-objectification, the second part reflects on the design identity of objectified slimming advertisements, whilst the third part interrogates the ASASA's position regarding objectified images as misleading testimonials. The paper concludes by reading these objectified advertisements through a positivist lens and answers the two-part question posed above.

## **Objectification and self-objectification**

An objectified image is the portrayal of a person where the emphasis is not on the person's ability, intelligence or opinion, but rather on depicting the person or part of the person as a sexual object. This is often achieved overtly, such as using a pin-up calendar girl who draws attention to, for example, a replacement part for a vehicle, or by utilising sexual innuendoes in deodorant and fashion advertisements. These objectified images are entrenched in Eurocentric media trends and have become the norm for projecting women in commercial messages. An analysis of fifty-eight magazines published in the United States of America found that one of every two images of women in advertisements is objectified and just under ten per cent is depicted as sexualised victims. The highest frequency, however, is in men's magazines where three out of four images depict objectification and adolescent girls as opposed to women's magazines that depict two out of three images as objectified (Stankiewicz & Rosselli, 2008). Although this project did not investigate the frequency of objectification in South African magazines,

one could reasonably expect a similar trend and frequency in South African magazines with a Eurocentric and American cultural predisposition.

A number of studies indicate that this predisposition of objectifying the female figure leads to a number of harmful outcomes, namely self-objectification, a lower self-esteem, negative body esteem and the associated drive for thinness which in turn may give rise to eating disorders. Objectification is not only an external process where a marketer portrays a woman as a sexualised object, it is also an internalised process that takes place within a viewer when encountering an objectified image. The viewer firstly reads the image as a sexualised object and only then judges the qualities and competencies of the objectified person. Scholars have also established that some women, for example, may judge women who dress in sensual clothes as less intelligent and less competent (Gurung & Chrouser 2007), and that they may even dehumanise the person they have objectified (Puvia & Vaes 2013). Scholars, in addition, have also established that it is possible to reduce this objectification effect by emphasising the competence of the person portrayed in an image. Women tend to judge women who are portrayed as competent (i.e. portrayed as doctors, scientists and the like) as more capable than women portrayed otherwise. They also tend to objectify women portrayed as professionals to a lesser extent, even if they are provocatively dressed (Johnson & Gurung 2011). In addition to the external and projected process of objectifying others, sexist imagery also affects viewers' self-esteem through a social comparative process. An extensive pan-European survey revealed that both women and men exposed to sexist television commercials regarded their own body size as too large or too thin. This seminal study surveyed 15 239 subjects from fifteen European Union member states and found that respectively only 46% of males and 31% of females were satisfied with their weight. Even more alarming is that 20% of underweight females expressed a desire to be even thinner. Amongst the females, the biggest single group that were satisfied with their weight (58%) were actually underweight. This negative body esteem and the associated drive for thinness appears to be an integral part of the Eurocentric psyche (McElhone et al 1999).

Objectified imagery not only triggers negative body esteem within the same gender, but it may also even intensify this effect when a viewer encounters scantily dressed models of the opposite sex (Dens et al 2009). A tentative explanation for this is the *possible partner* effect (Dens et al 2009: 375). A viewer may subconsciously view the objectified person as a possible partner, realise that this is unrealistic, and so experience negative body esteem. Images of scantily dressed models, in addition to objectification and triggering negative body esteem, may even evoke a negative response towards the product associated with these models. A study indicated that some women even experience tension and fatigue when viewing nudity in advertisements (LaTour 1990) and show a significantly more favourable attitude towards an advertisement and brand when the model is demure rather than nude or semi-nude (LaTour & Henthorne 1993).

Given the pervasiveness of objectified imagery in Eurocentric media, despite its reported negative effect, it is not surprising to find explicit calls for self-objectification from within the entertainment industry. Well-known American actress Cameron Diaz expressed the opinion that every woman wants to be objectified (Breines 2012), and thus advocates self-objectification. This self-objectification process is triggered when an individual makes a deliberate decision to become a gazed-at sexual object and takes active steps towards objectification. Media trends, relationship expectations and Eurocentric societal influences, in turn, support this practice (McKay 2013). It is not just attracting the male gaze, but it is also a self-surveillance practice of turning a self-objectifying gaze inwards (Calogero 2013). This introspective, self-evaluating gaze is further encouraged by objectifying images in the media, actual life experiences, and the objectifying theme of some companies that encourages viewers to practise self-objectification

(Kroon Van Diest & Perez 2013). A fitting example of a company that uses self-objectification as their marketing tool, is Victoria's Secret. This company, possibly the most famous distributor of sensual women's attire, uses sexual objectification as the focus point of their promotional material and fashion shows. They teach "and [normalize] self-objectification" and project "normalized pornography as desirable, self-chosen, and empowering." Their media campaigns encourage women to become desirable sexual objects (Kite 2011a) and celebrate the idea that sexual self-objectification is normal and acceptable (Kite 2011b).

Economou, a graphic designer who considers herself a feminist, aptly accuses the media of being complicit in stereotyping this identity, and that the media is responsible for wrongfully encouraging a culture of glamour and sexualisation, a culture that is in conflict and contrast with the traditional culture and values of many young people in South Africa. She goes further and asserts that this construct is problematic for young people who wish to establish their identity and in particular for those from materially disadvantaged communities in that it reduces adolescent opinion regarding sexuality and relationships to an "exchange of material and the acquisition of status" (Economou 2012: 39).

One could even suggest that there are hidden parallels between self-objectification and the fourth wave of feminism. Whilst there are varied perspectives on the fourth wave of feminism, Leupold (2010) describes it as modern women who do not want to be equal to men, but that they want to be like men with "casual sex to cut-throat boardroom deals." She defines the HBO's popular television series *Sex and the City* as an example that reflects this movement. This series portrays single, independent women as sexual predators where lines of hunting for shoes and men become blurred (Leupold 2013). This promotion of self-objectification is in stark contrast to the ideals of feminist writers who call for practitioners to be more "constructive in the positive modelling of gender identities" (Economou 2013: 60). Whilst it appears to be bizarre to equate self-objectification to a form of feminism, objectified images in slimming commercials and in Victoria's Secret's *feminist empowerment* campaigns attempt to do this. They guide women to become unknowingly subservient to self-objectification by using a feminist empowerment disguise. Although objectification is mostly about the female form, one must be aware that self-objectification is gender blind (Frederick et al 2005) and that self-objectification is applicable to both male and female viewers when they interact with hedonic imagery.

From the work of the scholars mentioned above, we can summarise the effect of objectified images, and the link between objectifying and self-objectification, as follows: Objectified imagery in Eurocentric media may trigger, in some women, a negative body esteem and an unrealistic drive for thinness; viewers judge the objectified of lesser importance and may even dehumanise the portrayed individual; it affects a viewer's self-esteem through a social self-comparison process and the possible partner effect, and it may even trigger a negative response towards a product associated with the objectified imagery. Media trends, as well as the explicit and implicit call for self-objectification by marketers and the entertainment industry, however, encourage self-surveillance, and normalise a self-objectifying practice. The self-objectifying person now in turn tends to objectify others (Gurung & Chrouser 2007). Advertisers who market slimming products (inadvertently) exploit self-objectifying viewers by using objectification and imagery that encourage and support self-objectification to market their inert substances. The section that is to follow reflects on the design identities in slimming advertisements that encourage self-objectification.

## Design identities of objectified images in slimming advertisements

A visual examination of seventeen popular South African women's magazines<sup>4</sup> from March 2013 to March 2014 revealed that slimming advertisements targeting young women are particularly prominent in magazines that advocate health, wellness, nutrition, and fitness and magazines that target younger women. These health and fitness magazines contain a higher proportion of slimming advertisements than magazines that target older women or magazines that promote home, cooking, wedding, outdoor and/or gardening activities.

A South African magazine that stood out with a high proportion of slimming advertisements is the *Fitness* magazine. This magazine featured 303 advertisements over a period of one year of which 205 (68%) were slimming advertisements. The mean number (29.3) of slimming advertisements per edition is significantly more<sup>5</sup> than the mean number (14) of advertisements that promote other products and services that appear in this magazine ( $p = 0.00$ ). This magazine targets young women that are health and fitness conscious. The look and feel of the magazine is aptly summarised by a section in the editor's letter where she informs the reader that the magazine will put the reader "on the path to a lean and strong athletic physique" (Carruthers 2014: 6). The difference between this magazine and other health magazines such as *Shape* and *Women's Health* is the high proportion of objectified images that accompany their health, slimming, and fitness articles in addition to the high proportion of slimming advertisements. *Shape* and *Women's Health* feature more articles and advertisements about topics such as food, relationships, fashion, hair and cosmetics than the *Fitness* magazine.

It is for this reason that this paper uses objectified imagery in slimming advertisements from *Fitness* as the objects of analysis. These objectified images mirror imagery in their international counterpart magazines, such as the North American *FITNESS*, and are stereotypical of the thin-ideal female figure promoted by Eurocentric media and cultural norms. A frequency analysis of weight-loss advertisements that appeared in the bi-monthly *Fitness* magazine from March/April 2013 to March/April 2014 revealed that 157 slimming advertisements (76%) objectified women. Although not included in the scope of this article, one must note that most images of women in this magazine that accompany articles and features are objectified. This is due to the nature of this magazine and its articles on exercise, fitness and achieving a slim figure. The thematic analysis identified four different design identities, namely the sexualised-objectified; the fitness-objectified; the product-feature; and the text-based identity advertisement. The frequency of these design identities are presented in Table 1 below. An analysis of the data indicates that the mean frequency of sexualised-objectified imagery per edition (13.9) is significantly higher<sup>6</sup> than the mean frequencies of the fitness-objectified (8.6), the product feature (6) and text-based (0.9) weight loss design identities ( $p = 0.00$ ). Similarly, even the mean fitness-objectified identity advertisement (8.6) appears significantly<sup>7</sup> more than the mean product feature identity advertisement (6) per edition ( $p = 0.02$ ). The analysis categorised advertisements of clothing that is meant to control a figure and to project an image of slimness under *Advertisements, other than slimming*.

The sexualised-objectified identity typically features a pin-up type photograph of a model as the main graphic feature, an image of the product with accompanying headline, a sub-heading and maybe some text to describe the product. These pin-up type images normally feature a model in a suggestive pose such as with an arched back, or a model with a flirtatious facial expression. These models differ from the archetypal pin-up burlesque images of Marilyn Monroe and Bettie Page in that they are not dressed in lingerie nor in stiletto heels, but in modern two-piece bathing costumes and draw a viewer's attention to the thin-ideal body shape of the featured models.

There is normally little or no text connecting the model to the product and neither do marketers use text to explicitly claim product efficacy. These highly sexualised-objectified images visually portray the physique that an advertiser would want a viewer to believe is possible to attain through using the advertised product. Marketers could easily substitute the slimming product with another (almost random) product and still use the same image to endorse or attract attention. Ninety-seven (47%) slimming advertisements in a year's editions of *Fitness* use this identity. An example of a sexualised-objectified identity is subsequently presented in Figure 1(a) below.

	Mar/ Apr 2013	May/ Jun 2013	Jul/ Aug 2013	Sep/ Oct 2013	Nov/ Dec 2013	Jan/ Feb 2014	Mar/ Apr 2014	Total n	Means	%
Sexualised-objectified	6	12	14	15	19	19	12	97	13.9	32%
Fitness-objectified	10	10	7	7	8	9	9	60	8.6	20%
Product feature	4	6	5	8	5	7	7	42	6.0	14%
Text-based	0	1	2	0	1	1	1	6	0.9	2%
Sub-total slimming advertisements	20	29	28	30	33	36	29	205	29.3	68%
Advertisements, other than slimming	11	11	13	15	17	19	12	98	14.0	32%
TOTAL	31	40	41	45	50	55	41	303	43.3	100%

**Table 1**

**The frequency, total advertisements per edition, means and proportion of different design identities in the *Fitness* magazine advertisements from March/April 2013 to March/April 2014.**

The fitness-objectified identity, similar to the sexualised-objectified identity, uses an image of an objectified model as the main graphic feature, an image of the product, a supporting headline and with or without accompanying text regarding the ingredients and the product. These objectified images, in contrast to the pin-up type images, portray models as athletes or models in a training or in an exercise environment. The focus with the fitness-objectified identity is on fitness, health, physical performance, and a competitive atmosphere. The model or models often wear product branded two-piece gym clothes, and text next to a model identifies the model as the product's ambassador or as an athlete sponsored by the advertiser. The main difference between the highly sexualised-objectified identity and the fitness-objectified identity is that the latter veneers the objectified woman as an athlete rather than a perspicuous pin-up calendar girl. It is this fitness-objectified image that advertisers use as a new design identity in slimming advertisements. Sixty (29%) slimming advertisements in a year's editions of *Fitness* use this identity. An example of a fitness-objectified identity may be seen in figure 1(a) and figure 1(b) below.



**Figures 1(a) and (b)**  
**Examples of highly sexualised-objectified and fitness-objectified**  
**identities in slimming advertisements,**  
**(source: *Fitness*, March/April 2013: 23 and 17).**

The product-feature identity, in general, provides an image of the product, a supporting headline, supplemented with text about product efficacy and occasional photographs of the ingredients. These identities do not use models to buttress their claimed efficacy but rather depend on attractive graphics and informative text to sway a potential consumer. Only forty-two (20%) slimming advertisements in the seven editions of *Fitness* are product-feature identities.

The traditional text-based identities could include a variety of image and text elements. They typically promote a slimming programme, provide textual testimonies, include small “before” and “after” photographs, and bolster their product claims with promises such as rapid or permanent weight loss. These traditional advertisements feature significantly less in *Fitness* than the highly sexualised- and fitness-objectified advertisements. Only six of these advertisements (3%) appeared in the twelve-month period of analysis. The most frequent misleading elements that these older and traditional advertisements use are consumer testimonials, the stereotypical “before” and “after” photographs, claims of rapid slimming, that no exercise nor a diet is required, that the promised slimming is permanent, that they provide a money-back guarantee, that their product is guaranteed to work, that it is made or derived from natural products and is safe to use, and that it is supported by scientific research or endorsed by the medical fraternity (Cleland et al 2002). It is in particular the product-feature and traditional text-based identities that provide sufficient grounds for a consumer to lodge a complaint with the ASASA. These identities normally provide measurable textual claims which advertisers cannot substantiate. These advertisers invariably receive an adverse ruling from the ASASA after a consumer complaint regarding the lack of substantiation. The highly sexualised and objectified design identities, however, are more difficult to attract adverse rulings due to the lack of measurable misleading textual claims accompanying the otherwise objectionable image. These objectified images act as strong hedonic and visceral visual testimonies of the product’s claimed efficacy and relies on the viewer to make this obvious inference. The question that now arises is whether an objectified image that explicitly portrays the desired outcome of the slimming product enables

marketers to circumvent the Advertising Standards Authority's Code on Slimming and their requirements concerning the use of testimonials and endorsement.

### **The position of the Advertising Standards Authority of South Africa pertaining to objectified images as misleading testimonials**

The Advertising Standards Authority of South Africa (ASASA) has made several adverse rulings against advertisers of slimming products. Advertisers would typically not hold substantiation for their claims, they often mislead consumers, and misuse statistics and scientific information. A review of rulings available on ASASA's website from June 2011 to June 2014 indicates that consumers lodged seventy-one complaints against advertisers of slimming products. Only nine complaints were either dismissed, a no ruling was given or the complaint was rejected. The rest of the complaints were upheld and received adverse rulings in favour of the complainant. The most frequent claims that advertisers make are about losing weight (50), that the product has fat burning properties (19), that their product suppresses appetite (16) and that it increases one's energy (13). The nature of the complaints were about the lack of substantiation by the advertiser (51), that they mislead consumers (31), and allegations of breaching a previous ruling (23) where an advertiser had to amend or remove an advertisement. There are nine complaints regarding the issue of using testimonials in the advertisements.

The ASASA's position towards implied claims imbedded as testimonials in images is not what one would expect given the Code of Advertising Practice. Although the section on testimonials makes it clear that an advertisement "should not contain any statement or visual presentation" that is likely to mislead a potential consumer and that testimonials – which must be genuine – "should not be used in a manner likely to mislead" (ASASA 2004), they do not always rule in favour of a consumer complaint with regards to visual testimonials. A recent case entailed a complaint lodged by a consumer against an advertiser promoting Garcinia as the key ingredient in a slimming product (ASASA 2014). One of the complainant's concerns is that the image of the model is in contravention of a section of the Code that deals with testimonials. This particular section requires testimonials to be genuine and that testimonial claims require substantiation. The complainant argues that the image of the (objectified) model serves as a testimonial, and the impression is that one may achieve similar results when using the product. A section of the advertiser's website is presented in Figure 2 below. ASASA, however, did not share this view. They regard a testimonial as a formal statement from an individual (according to the Code) and view the person in the advertisement as "merely an attractive model. No mention is made of her having used the product, or her perceptions of its efficacy" (ASASA 2014). Whilst it is true that a testimonial must come from an identifiable person with an expressed opinion or claim, such images do in fact act as implicit claims for the advertised product. The ASASA did acknowledge that these images reinforce the unsubstantiated slimming message, but did not uphold this specific aspect of the consumer complaint. However, they did rule against the advertiser on grounds of substantiation, misleading claims, and contravention of the Code on Slimming. Such an interpretation of the Code allows advertisers to employ objectified images as visual testimonials in slimming products as long as they do not use unequivocal text to link the image to any product claims.





Figure 2

A section of a marketers' website that uses an objectified image as a testimony of a slimming product's claimed effect (source: <http://garciniaslim.co.za/>).

The question that we can justly ask is whether a reasonable consumer would interpret a model next to a product, in the absence of text to support the visual claim, as a testimony to the product's efficacy and whether such an image is likely to mislead a consumer. In this question lies the conundrum. Even if a reasonable viewer accepts a model as a visual testimony of a product's claimed efficacy and even if it is likely to mislead a consumer, the ASASA will not rule against an advertiser if there are no explicit claims by the visual testifier as regards the product. Advertisers therefore have, in South Africa at least, the liberty to use visual statements as testimonies, and so mislead the consumer. The next section provides a reflection on two possible outcomes when reading objectified images that act as a testimonial for a consumer product such as a slimming product.

### Reading of self-objectifying images through a positivist lens

This paper posed a two-part question, namely: What is the potential effect of an objectified identity in an advertisement and would advertisers be able to circumvent the ASASA's code that regulates advertising? Based on one of their rulings, the answer with regards to circumvention of the ASASA's Code on Advertising is clear. The South African regulator does not view an image of a model as misleading, even if it functions as a visual testimony and promotes a measurable effect of the advertised product. Even though clause 10 in Appendix 11 of the ASASA's Code states that a testimonial or endorsement must be genuine and must be related to a personal

experience over a reasonable period, they still require a definitive textual claim by the model to link him or her to the product's claimed efficacy. If we accept this interpretation as correct, then we must also accept this principle as appropriate (and, by extension, applicable) for other products and services. Transferring this, what I argue to be a flawed testimonial requirement, to other products creates an apparent dilemma that we cannot ignore and forces us to question the ASASA's position pertaining to testimonials.

I argue that the ASASA erred in their ruling and that even a silent endorser, a visual testimony without measurable and direct claims, has the ability to mislead a viewer. A visual testimony of a product's efficacy does not have to explicitly state that the endorsing testifier's opinion or physique or state of health, for example, is the result of the advertiser's claim. I argue that a viewer implicitly views and accepts a visual testimony as representing the advertiser's claim. This implicit viewer acceptance of a visual testimony is demonstrated in Figure 3 below. This figure is a simulated and exaggerated example of a vehicle advertisement. The image on the left is an example of a company advertising a vehicle at a low price. Suffice to say that a consumer expects to obtain this vehicle at the advertised price. The vehicle must also be able to perform according to the suggested ability as indicated by the photograph in the advertisement. The price indicated on this advertisement for that particular vehicle at the time of this article appears to be unrealistically low. It is obvious that when a dealer supplies a vehicle as depicted in the image on the right, it would not be unreasonable from a customer to reject the offer and to expect the vehicle depicted in the first image. If we now argue, by using the ASASA's ruling that the vehicle on the left is *merely an attractive [vehicle] model*, it becomes obvious that this line of arguing is untenable.

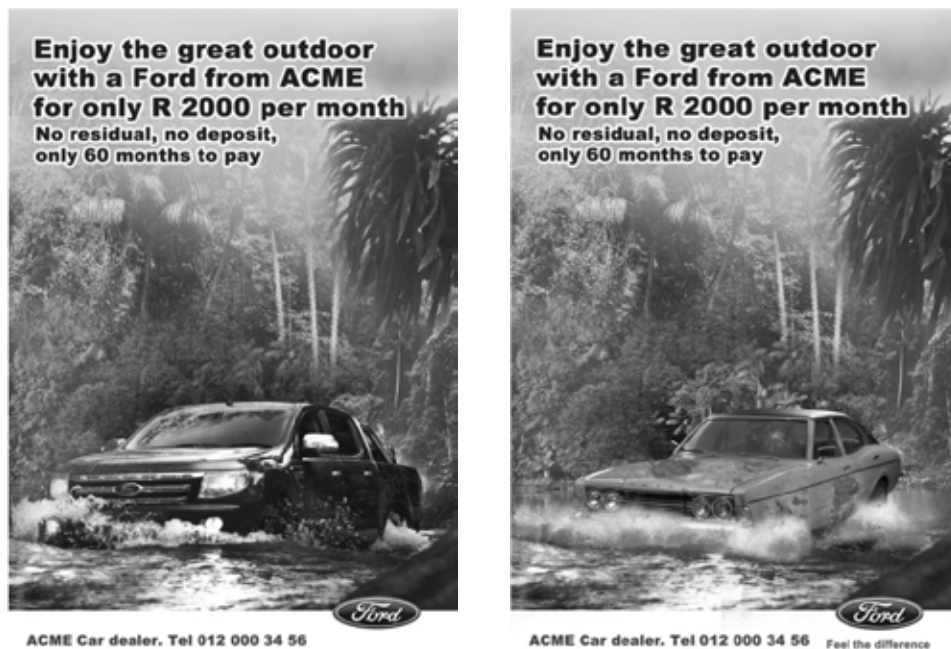


Figure 2

A simulated vehicle advertising in the spirit of the “merely attractive model”  
(source: adapted from a Ford Ranger advertisement by Lezanne vd Walt. The original ad is by Ric Smith of Smudge Digital Design and Art Direction <http://www.ricsmithdesign.com/index.html>).

A reasonable consumer, when confronted with an image of a vehicle in an advertisement that displays a certain ability, expects to obtain such a vehicle with that ability even if the text makes no mention of this. Whilst it is obvious that the *merely attractive model* principle may not be appropriate for a vehicle advertisement, slimming advertisers have relative freedom to use the *merely attractive model* principle in sexualised-objectified and fitness-objectified imagery as misleading graphic identities in their marketing material. Reading objectified slimming advertisements through a positivist lens could produce two contrasting results. The first is a negative association and a concomitant rejection of the advertising messages. The grounds for this prediction is deduced from the empirical work of a number of scholars who indicate that women view other women in objectified imagery as less intelligent and less competent, may dehumanise them, it may induce negative body esteem and even lead to a negative product association (Gurung & Chrouser 2007; Puvia & Vaes 2013; Lavine et al 1999; McElhone et al 1999; LaTour 1990; LaTour & Henthorne 1993).

The second prediction is a more positive effect in favour of the advertiser. This prediction is also a deduction from published empirical work. Placing an objectified image in a professional environment such as a gymnasium, or projecting the objectified person as a professional model or fitness instructor, may lessen the objectification process and make it easier for an individual to accept self-objectification as appropriate. Viewers are inclined to view the professional portrayed as competent and will objectify them to a lesser extent (Johnson & Gurung 2011). In addition, social and media trends (McKay 2013) as well as objectifying trends from companies such as Victoria's Secret make self-objectification acceptable and a desirable trait (Calogero 2013; Kroon Van Diest & Perez 2013). Advertisements that employ sexualised-objectification and fitness-objectification as an identity could possibly persuade some viewers to adopt self-objectification as a norm, competitively rise to the "challenge" of a fitness-objectified identity, and respond favourably to the advertiser's wishes.

## **Concluding remarks**

This paper reflected on the design identity of slimming advertisements in a selected South African women's magazine. A thematic and frequency analysis indicated that advertisers portrayed women as highly sexualised and fitness objects in 52% of the magazine's advertisements through the use of objectified images. These objectified images act as silent visual testimonies of the various products' unsubstantiated efficacy claims. Although the ASASA Code of Advertising requires that testimonials must be genuine, they do not regard an objectified image as a misleading visual testimony. They view such an image as a *mere attractive model*. This mere attractive model principle allows advertisers, and in particular marketers of slimming products, to effectively use objectification as a visceral and hedonic misleading graphic identity.

Although my earlier argument that some viewers may respond favourably towards sexualised- or fitness-objectified imagery in slimming commercials is a hypothetical conjecture, objectification theory may offer partial support. Objectification theory suggests that viewers, when exposed to objectified imagery, may adopt objectification as the norm and start a process of self-objectification and self-surveillance (Fredrickson & Roberts 1997). Viewers who consent to self-objectification may accept sexualised and fitness-objectified images as the norm and, consequently, a desirable outcome. What we do not know, however, is if typical South African viewers would respond accordingly to the objectified imagery hypothesis, and if they do, to what extent. This is a question that needs validation through experimental work.

## Notes:

- 1 I use the term slimming (as opposed to the term weight loss) in this article in the same context as ASASA's Code on Slimming, namely to indicate the loss of mass, to limit mass, and to control mass.
- 2 The ASASA's Code of Advertising Practice consists of 5 sections and 10 addendums. The Code is based on international norms, prepared by the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC). The Code is drafted by the ASASA and representatives of the marketing communication industry and is adjusted from time to time to meet local demands. The ASASA Code is available at: [http://asasa.org.za/Default.aspx?mnu\\_id=11](http://asasa.org.za/Default.aspx?mnu_id=11). The ICC Code is available at: <http://www.iccwbo.org/advocacy-codes-and-rules/areas-of-work/marketing-and-advertising/>.
- 3 Advertisers who market slimming and related products must conform to the requirements as set out in the ASASA's Code on Slimming, also known as Appendix D – Advertising for Slimming. This particular code lists twenty-one items under five headings, namely: Introduction; Mass loss; Diet plans; Aids to dieting; Foods and appetite depressants.
- 4 Appendix D is available at: [http://asasa.org.za/Default.aspx?mnu\\_id=108](http://asasa.org.za/Default.aspx?mnu_id=108).
- 5 I reviewed seventeen South African magazines that are most frequently found and readily available in franchised retail and book stores. They are *Fitness*, *Women's Health*, *Glamour Hair*, *Fair Lady*, *You, Your Family*, *Shape*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour*, *Weigh-Less*, *Real*, *Sarie*, *True Love*, *Elle South Africa*, *Bona*, *Destiny* and *Rooi Rose*.
- 6 I used a *t*-test to compare the two means at 0.05. The calculated *t* statistic of 13.5 > than the two-tailed critical value of 2.45. The *p* value is 0.000001.
- 7 I used single factor ANOVA to compare the mean frequency of the four identities with each other. The calculated *F* value of 33.4 > than the *F* critical value of 3.0. The *p* value is 0.000000001.
- 8 I used a *t*-test to compare the two means at 0.05. The calculated *t* statistic of 3.1 > than the two-tailed critical value of 2.45. The *p* value is 0.021.

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Rudi de Lange is Associate Professor in Visual Communication at the Tshwane University of Technology. He holds a PhD in didactics from the University of Stellenbosch and an MDipTech in Graphic Design from the Technikon Free State, now the Central University of Technology, Free State.